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### Putting it in Context

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**PUTTING IT IN CONTEXT: THE USE OF VIGNETTES IN QUALITATIVE  
INTERVIEWING**

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## **Putting it in context: The use of vignettes in qualitative interviewing**

### **Abstract**

The paper draws on two separate studies employing developmental vignettes (hypothetical scenarios which unfold through a series of stages) to interview research participants. One study used the 'Davie' vignette, which was a conventional fixed narrative, while in the second, the 'Jack and Jenny' vignettes were made interactive by hyperlinking a series of PowerPoint scenarios and making the choice of the succeeding slide dependent on the interviewee's reaction to its predecessor. Our analytic standpoint, in respect of both vignettes, is that of Schutzian phenomenology. We point to differences in both topical and motivational relevances in the processes of interpretation undergone by participants in considering the vignette scenario and in the situation of action. However, we show that research participants' responses to vignettes can yield data of interest in their own right as participants perform 'Thou-orientations' and 'They-orientations' in their consideration of the stimuli. We close with a comparative evaluation of the fixed 'Davie' and the interactive 'Jack and Jenny' vignettes.

**Keywords:** Vignettes; Substance Misuse; Longitudinal Interviewing; Phenomenology; Ethnomethodology

## **Putting it in context: The use of vignettes in qualitative interviewing**

### **What are vignettes?**

As a sociological research tool, vignettes have been defined as:

‘A technique used in structured and depth interviews as well as focus groups, providing sketches of fictional (or fictionalized) scenarios. The respondent is then invited to imagine, drawing on his or her own experience, how the central character in the scenario will behave. Vignettes thus collect situated data on group values, group beliefs and group norms of behaviour. While in structured interviews respondents must choose from a multiple-choice menu of possible answers to a vignette, as used in depth interviews and focus groups, vignettes act as a stimulus to extended discussion of the scenario in question.’ (Bloor and Wood, 2006: 183).

This emphasis in sociology on the elicitation of data on group beliefs and values contrasts with their use in psychological studies, where the research interest is primarily in their value for predicting behaviour (see for example, Parker et al. 2001). Vignettes in sociological research can take the form of a ‘snapshot’ scenario (Bloor, 1991 for example) or a story that unfolds through a series of stages. Hughes, (1998) describes the latter as a ‘continuous narrative’ or developmental approach and, usually, participants are invited to comment on the various stages of the story’s progression. Vignettes can be presented to participants on paper (Hughes, 1998), videotape (Johnson, 2000; Sled et al., 2002) and via computers (Stolte, 1994; Vitkovitch and Tyrell, 1995; Taylor, 2006).

In this paper, we seek to advance an interpretative framework for the application of

vignettes in social research, building upon, rather than superseding, those of previous authors; most notably Hughes, (1998); Hughes & Huby, (2002; 2004) and McKeganey et al., (1996). We draw particularly on the phenomenological theories of Alfred Schutz, and Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology to show their practical value in the design and execution of vignettes as well as in the subsequent evaluation of the data. In contrast to the use of vignettes for prediction of motor-social forms of behaviour, we will seek to sketch a framework for how vignettes can be designed and applied, and the resulting data analysed, from an interpretative and predominantly phenomenological perspective. We will try to show how scenarios can be presented to interviewees that encourage them to engage in various acts of orientation and how, through such acts, the researcher is able to gain insight into participants' interpretative processes and the multi-faceted nature of their stock of knowledge. We will suggest that vignettes can serve as an effective longitudinal research instrument, highlighting changes in interpretative frameworks as well as providing data from which to generate a grounded understanding of such changes. We will point to the importance of the plausibility of scenarios so that interviewees can relate them to their own life stories. And finally, we will seek to highlight how making developmental scenarios interactive can address some of the challenges of vignette-based interviewing, as well as highlighting areas in need of further research and debate.

## **Method**

The approach to vignette-based interviewing outlined in this paper has been developed over approximately five years (from 2002 to 2007) and through two distinct empirical studies. Firstly, the 'Davie' vignette (see Appendix), the data from which is discussed in the majority of this article, was created as part of an empirical

study into user involvement in drug treatment decision-making (Fischer et al., 2007). The researchers developed a hypothetical scenario concerning a 19 year-old male drug user (Davie) and his subsequent route through community-based and residential drug treatment. This was used as part of a semi-structured, qualitative topic guide where participants would be presented with the scenario in the latter stages of the interview, having first answered questions relating to their own experiences of addiction and healthcare services. In total, 78 drug users (who were in the initial stages of treatment) took part in the interviews. Of these, 38 were beginning treatment within a residential and a community-based treatment site in Scotland (20 and 18 respectively). In addition, 20 residential and 20 community-based service users in England were also interviewed. Of the cohort of 78 drug users, 59 were re-interviewed after a 12-week interval, whereupon they were asked to discuss their most recent experiences of drug treatment and comment on the Davie vignette again in the light of those experiences. In addition to interviews with service users, 24 key workers from within the participating treatment agencies were interviewed and asked to comment on the Davie vignette. Practitioners, however, were only interviewed once. The Davie vignette consisted of nine 'fixed' stages- fixed in the sense that the development of the scenario was controlled by the interviewer- and at the close of each stage participants were asked a standardized question (see appendix). The unfolding of the scenario was fixed in order to allow the researchers to compare service users' responses to the vignette at initial and follow-up interview, and also to compare the responses of service users with those of their key workers. However, in addition to asking standardized questions, the interviewer was able to ask unscripted questions and probe further in the light of participants' responses. All of the interviews were tape recorded and transcribed word-for-word.

The second study drawn on here was a PhD. research project exploring young people's injury-risking behaviour in leisure settings (Jenkins, 2006a). As with the Davie scenario, the vignettes in the second study (the Jack and Jenny vignettes) were employed within semi-structured interviews, though this time with 15 young people and their parents shortly after they had presented to an Accident and Emergency department in South Wales as a result of the child sustaining accidental injuries. Wherever possible, parents and their children were interviewed separately. If the young person was female, they and their parent/s were asked to complete the Jenny vignette. Conversely if the young person was male, they were asked to complete the Jack vignette. The intention behind this gender-based selection was to ensure that the situations, which the vignettes depicted, related to the actual leisure activities of the young person. As with the Davie scenario, participants were asked to work through the vignettes towards the latter stages of the interview, having first discussed their own experiences of accidents and injury-risking behaviour. However, unlike the Davie scenario, the Jack and Jenny vignettes were interactive in the sense that participants were able to influence how the vignette unfolded, by selecting potential courses of action from a fixed number of options.

In this paper, we will draw on these vignettes to illustrate the theoretical and methodological arguments we put forward. Following an introduction to the primary aims of the vignette method, discussion on the Davie vignette data is divided into three themes. These are: exploring acts of perceptual orientation; the application of vignettes in qualitative longitudinal research and dealing with the problem of plausibility. The final section of this paper draws on the Jack and Jenny vignettes to

illustrate how the interactive nature of these scenarios offered new opportunities and challenges for the method. In no way, however, is this discussion intended to be exhaustive.

### **Belief vs Action: A false divide?**

The first step in utilising vignettes from an interpretative perspective is to clarify their purpose. Unlike their more experimental counterparts, the aim of qualitative vignette interviewing should not be to arrive at an accurate prediction of an interviewee's behaviour but instead to achieve insight into the social components of the participant's interpretative framework and perceptual processes. In doing so, the researcher should reject the somewhat reductionist notion that 'beliefs' and 'actions' are binary opposites, instead conceiving of interviewees' responses to vignette stimuli as social actions in their own right. To explain and support this argument, we draw on Schutz's (1970) arguments on systems of perceptual relevance and how these can be used to achieve a richer understanding of the vignette process.

By systems of relevances, Schutz refers to the cognitive processes by which individuals orient themselves to perceptual stimuli. Schutz identified three types of perceptual relevance- topical, interpretative and motivational- as being integral to the individual's perception. Topical relevances relate to the extent to which a social situation becomes 'problematic' for the individual. This can be as a result of the individual's own volition (intrinsic) or whether a situation is made salient as a result of imposition (constrained). Interpretative relevances are those drawn from the discrete stock of knowledge which the individual has acquired (up until the precise moment in which cognition occurs), that are deemed salient to the situation at hand.



Motivational relevances are twofold, as they comprise both the purpose-at-hand which the individual is seeking to pursue (the in-order-to motives) and the product of the individual's reflection on past action (the because motives).

According to Schutz, an actor's interpretation of a given situation only has that degree of clarity required by the participant's purpose-at-hand. For everyday purposes, often a very sketchy interpretation of the situation will suffice. In vignette interviewing, however, the more detailed the interpretation the participant can bring to bear on the scenario the more able is the researcher to gather data on the stock of knowledge which the interviewee possesses. Thus, whilst vignettes can help researchers to explore participants' knowledge, what they can NOT do is to simulate (in the interview setting or the focus group) the interpretative work that the participant would do in the situation of action. In the first case, vignettes carry their own distinctive motivational relevances for the participant, such as the opportunity for reflection or the desire to be paid for completing an interview. Second, in requiring the participant to provide an interpretation and make a choice of responses, the researcher is problematising (for the benefit of the participant) a situation which may normally be relatively unconsidered or perhaps even highly routinised. The fact that the participant's motivational relevances are different in responding to the vignette than in the situation of action is likely to lead in the former case to a more considered, more elaborate interpretation than would perhaps occur in the latter.

As the interpretative processes in which individuals engage are qualitatively different when responding to vignettes as opposed to 'real life' situations some writers have argued that a methodological distinction must be drawn between how a participant

*believes* a vignette situation would unfold and how they would themselves *act* if presented with a similar set of events. Finch, (1987: 113) for example argues that, ‘It is in the area of the relationship between belief and action that I see the biggest danger of the mis-use of vignettes’. However, the separation of participants’ responses to vignettes (beliefs) from other forms of their behaviour (actions) is something of a methodological fallacy. As Mills argues,

‘...there is not a discrepancy between an act and “its” verbalization, but a difference between two disparate actions, motor-social and verbal’ (Mills, 1940: 907).

Interview situations do not merely involve actors recalling previous experiences or speculating about future ones but are social actions *in-and-of* themselves. As such, the behaviour that occurs in a qualitative interview (generated as it is by the specific relationship between interviewer and interviewee) can be as illuminating as any other form of social action (Atkinson and Coffey, 2002). If therefore, one rejects the notion that vignettes either stand or fall on their ability to predict behaviour then discrepancies in participants’ verbal and motor-social forms of action can lead to a greater richness of data rather than diminish them.

### **Acts of orientation in vignette interviewing: We, Thou and They relationships**

Having clarified the purpose of our vignette method (that of exploring interpretative processes and experiences as opposed to predicting motor-social forms of behaviour) this section will seek to illustrate some of the practical ways in which researchers can use vignettes for such a task. Our first area of discussion is how vignettes can be used

to engage participants in various ‘acts’ of perceptual orientation (Schutz, 1967). Similar to systems of relevances, Schutz identified three discrete forms of orientation, which are pre-requisites to their corresponding forms of social relationships. The first, and perhaps most obvious, is the direct We-relationship which exists when one actor is engaged in meaningful interaction with an-other; for example when a researcher interviews a participant. The We-relationship is contingent upon both actors being aware of the other as a unique individual with their own subjective experiences and stream of consciousness, what Schutz describes as the We-orientation. In the We-relationship interaction is direct, as both actors co-exist in time and space, (usually) sharing a common purpose. In the context of the vignette interview, both researcher and participant can (in the We-relationship) observe each other’s facial and bodily movements and can check and re-interpret the meanings of each other’s actions.

This is unlikely to strike the reader as a particularly earth-shattering revelation. Whilst this is the case, an explanation of the We-relationship does aid us in identifying a second (and less obvious) relationship, which exists between the participant and the main protagonist in the vignette scenario. To engage in this relationship, the interviewee is required to perform particular acts of Thou-orientation. According to Schutz, such Thou-orientations relate to instances where the actor perceives an-other as a unique individual (as in the We-orientation) but with whom they are not engaged in meaningful interaction. In Schutz’s words, these Thou-orientations occur in situations where the individual, ‘is aware of somebody else whilst knowing that he is *unaware* of (them)’ (Schutz, 1967: 173, emphasis Schutz). In a research context, such Thou-orientations often occur in laboratory controlled

situations where participants are asked to observe an-other, often covertly (through a one-way mirror for example) and comment on the meaning and causes of the actor's behaviour. However, rather than actually requiring participants to observe others engaged in certain forms of action (a strategy which can be fraught with ethical difficulties) the researcher can, through vignettes, condense both the other and their behaviour into a virtual situation yet still observe the participant's interpretative practices at work. According to Schutz, when one seeks to interpret the motivations of an-other, that is being observed, one is limited to a discrete number of strategies. One of the most effective is for the individual to:

‘.... search his memory for similar actions of his own and, finding such, can draw from them a general principle concerning the relation of their in-order-to and because-motives. He can then assume that this principle holds true for the other person's actions as well as for his own and can proceed to interpret the other person's actions by “putting himself in his place” (Schutz, 1967: 174).

Through the Davie vignette the researchers were able to engage participants' Thou-orientations and, in so doing, gain valuable insights into their knowledge and experiences of drug treatment. By putting themselves in the character's place, participants assume that the protagonist is exposed to the same group norms as themselves and so explicate those norms in their responses to the vignettes. For example, consider the following interviewee's response to stage six of the vignette:

**‘Why do you think Davie would do that?’**

Give clean urine samples?

**Yes, providing clean urine samples and going back on the script.**

I came in here because I was told to provide a clean urine sample but it wasn't my urine.

**Right. So, do you think he would bypass it, find a way around it?**

Yeah you can always say to a guy that's not using, you know, "gimme some o' yir pish". Everybody does that out there.'

When asked to interpret Davie's motivations for providing clean samples this interviewee searched their memory and retrieved from their stock of knowledge a strip of experience which was deemed congruent with the situation thus depicted. Having done so, the participant attributes meaning to their past behaviour; namely, that he deliberately deceived the prescribing agency as this was necessary in-order-to obtain a rehab placement. The interviewee's past behaviour is then projected onto Davie, whose motivations he has assumed to be broadly similar to his own. As such, Davie's samples will not be *bona-fide* because the participant's relevant samples were not.

By projecting situations onto hypothetical characters and asking the interviewee to put themselves in the protagonist's shoes, sensitive data (such as those outlined above) can be obtained in an indirect, non-confrontational manner. Consider for example, how willing the participant may have been to truthfully answer the question, "Did you fake your own urine samples in order to get into this rehab?" Indeed, Barter and Renold, (1999 and 2000) used vignettes in a similar vein to explore, with young people, the issue of violence in children's homes. By using fictitious characters they hoped to explore this sensitive and (to many of their participants) close-to-home topic

in a way that did not generate distress and discomfort for their interviewees. As Barter and Renold (1999: 3) argue, ‘As commenting on a story is less personal than talking about direct experience, it is often viewed by participants as being less threatening’.

Thou-orientations thus have particular utility when researchers are seeking access to more ‘classified’ aspects of participants’ knowledge. As such, vignettes that enable participants to envisage themselves as the protagonist and in their situation are likely to yield rich data. Conversely, ‘the more abstract the interpretation is, the less chance it has of hitting its mark’ (Schutz, 1967: 175). It is for this reason that the plausibility of a scenario is crucial in the design of vignette stimuli, which is a point to which we will later return.

Whilst using vignettes to elicit Thou orientations can have the advantage of appearing less threatening to the participant (than if such questions were asked of them directly) this could also lead to participants revealing more about themselves and their past conduct than they may have done if presented with a more direct form of questioning. Whilst this has obvious advantages for the research process, it is important to ensure that participants are not ‘duped’ into disclosing highly personal or compromising information, and that participants are as fully informed as possible about what to expect when completing the exercise, how the resulting data will be used and under what circumstances the researcher may be required to disclose sensitive data to third parties.

Having discussed the We and Thou orientations we can turn our attention to the third

and final relationship which Schutz discusses; that which exists between the individual and their 'companions' in the life-world. Schutz describes companions as those actors whom the individual does not know personally (that is, as individuals with their own consciousness capable of creating their own subjective interpretations) but are nevertheless known to exist. As such, companions do not exist in the social world in their pure form but are instead ideal types; interpretative schema which represent a cross section of the individual's stock of knowledge and are the product of a 'synthesis of recognition' (Schutz, 1967) on the part of the individual. According to Schutz, when individuals draw on these syntheses of recognition, they are embarking upon acts of They-orientation. It is through They-orientations, Schutz argues, that individuals are able to function effectively in an anonymised social world.

The role of They-orientation in everyday life is perhaps best explained through reference to one of Schutz's own examples; that of a passenger boarding a train. Recent difficulties with the UK rail network notwithstanding, an individual who boards a train as a paying customer does so in the sub-conscious expectation that the train will be operated by an actor who approximates to their ideal type: train-driver. Although the passenger does not know the driver personally (indeed it is likely that they have never previously co-existed in space and time) the individual is likely to make certain basic assumptions as to their characteristics and behaviour. These assumptions are themselves the product of accumulated evidence taken, largely, from the individual's past experiences; for example, the times they have previously traveled on trains. It is likely, for example, that the passenger will take for granted (based on previous experiences) that the train-driver possesses the necessary technical knowledge and skills required to operate the train. They may also assume that the

driver will use those skills and his/her technical knowledge to ensure the train arrives at its destination at the time it is scheduled to do so.

Following Schutz, let us replace the example of the passenger boarding a train with that of an injecting drug-user entering a community treatment clinic. In the user-involvement study, the researchers wished to explore service users' taken-for-granted assumptions (Garfinkel, 1967) regarding the conduct of drugs practitioners and whether these assumptions were considered 'realistic' from the point of view of those who provided treatment services. In order to explore this, the Davie vignette presented service users and key-workers with the following scenario:

Davie decides he isn't happy (with his methadone script being reduced) and drifts out of contact with the (clinic). He soon starts using cocaine as well as heroin and after a while is feeling paranoid and anxious all the time. He decides he wants a place in a rehab and re-contacts the clinic to see if they can help him. What do you think will happen when Davie returns to the clinic?

A number of participants engaged in acts of They-orientation in order to predict the response of the clinic staff to Davie's return. According to Schutz, assumptions made about the future behaviour of companions are dependent upon the companion being assigned a 'personal ideal type'. For example, if the interviewee believes the person Davie would approach at the clinic would be a nurse then their prediction of the nurse's behaviour would be based on the understanding of how nurses *generally* conduct themselves. As this is the case (and in a somewhat cyclical process) personal ideal types are constructed retrospectively, based on the interpretation of the



behaviour of companions that the individual has previously observed; or to use Schutz's terms, the conduct of companions are synthesised and allocated into specific 'courses-of-action' types.

Following Schutz, interviewees' predictions as to whether staff at the methadone clinic will be either sympathetic, hostile or mistrusting of Davie; whether they would assist him or frustrate him in his efforts to enter rehab are likely to be based on their understanding of how methadone clinic staff are-and-act, which will in turn be informed by the synthesis of re-cognition of the behaviour of methadone clinic staff that the interviewee *has* previously observed, by reference to the group norms and beliefs they have observed and absorbed in similar treatment settings.

**‘What do you think will happen when Davie goes back to the clinic?’**

Well, in my situation ..... it was the clinic that said about going into a rehab. So if he says to them, then they'll just say; "Well, we'll have to get back to you on that." And give it about six month or a year. Well, it took me two year or something like that to get in here..... I think that's what you do.'

**The use of vignettes in longitudinal research**

Having discussed the interpretative practices which vignettes can be used to stimulate, we will now seek to discuss the use of vignettes in charting changes in participants' interpretations over time. Cognition is a process constantly re-shaped through social encounters. The individual's stock of knowledge and systems of perceptual relevances are in a constant state of flux as they are added to, revised and re-interpreted throughout everyday life. Vignettes offer rich potential for exploring

changes in the interpretative machinations that may have resulted from specific life experiences, such as exposure to treatment interventions, traumatic events or a multitude of other contingencies. To illustrate this, we will draw upon users' responses to the Davie vignette at initial and follow-up interview. At the penultimate stage of the vignette participants were informed that Davie, having been successful in accessing a place at a rehab, is instructed by his therapist to attend group therapy sessions against his inclinations. Interviewees were then asked to decide whether the therapist was either 'right' or 'wrong' to tell Davie to attend the sessions. As users were asked twice to choose between these binary opposites (once upon starting treatment and again after a twelve-week interval) the research team were able to explore the extent to which the interviewees changed their position over the study period; for example (following Balint's {1957} argument that the therapist has an 'apostolic function' to 'convert' the client to the therapist's view of their problem and the appropriate therapy) whether or not they had become a convert to the therapist's point of view.

For comparative purposes, service users' answers were indexed into one of three discrete categories. These were: 'the therapist is right'; 'the therapist is wrong'; 'the interviewee does not specify whether the therapist is right or wrong (DNS)'. The following table outlines the distribution of service users' responses at both initial and follow-up interview.

**[Table 1: Distribution of service users answers to stage eight of the Davie vignette at initial and follow-up interview]**

As the table shows, despite being asked to give a ‘right-or-wrong’ answer, a sizeable number of interviewees at initial interview (n= 22) appeared reluctant to do so. Indeed, some participants remained indecisive despite further probing by the interviewer:

**‘Is the therapist right or wrong to tell Davie to attend the group sessions?’**

I don’t think she should force him I mean yeah he did know what he was signing but if he feels a little uncomfortable until he gets to know people I think he should be left to do what he wants really; not what he wants but if he wants to go on his own fair enough

**So you feel that she’s wrong basically is that what you’re saying?**

Not wrong because she’s trying to get him to know people by getting him into the groups but ...

**But you feel she’s doing it the wrong way or?**

Again it’s the 50/50 thing but erm he signed it so yeah he knew what he was signing up for. He knew it’d....’

Of the 59 service users who were successfully re-interviewed, the responses of 21 interviewees (36 per cent) were indexed differently at follow-up. Indeed, for a handful of participants there appeared to be a marked conversion in perspective:

**[Figure 1: A Comparison of One Service User’s Response to Stage Eight of the Davie Vignette at Initial and Follow-up Interview]**

However, whilst some conversions were dramatic one of the most striking features of

the data from the follow-up interviews was that fewer participants gave ambivalent answers. In contrast to the initial interview data, only a handful of interviewees (n=7) failed to provide definitive answers at follow-up. Examination of the qualitative data suggests that this finding was not due to difficulties in following up clients with (consistently) ambivalent views. It is certainly possible that, as a direct result of their recent treatment experiences, participants became more assured of their positions during the period between initial and follow-up interviews. Alternatively, it is also possible that previous exposure to the Davie scenario could have influenced service users' answers at follow-up; for example, if users became more familiar with and confident in responding to vignette stimuli second time around. This raises a difficult issue as, if the interviewee becomes inclined to change their responses as a result of gaining greater knowledge of the vignette exercise, to what extent can these changes in perception – which have occurred as a result of the interview process – be distinguished from those which have not?

Attributing cause to changes in participants' interpretative practices is further complicated by the analytical methods employed. Following Garfinkel, data (or 'rational properties') are products of the investigative processes through which they are brought into being. Therefore, one could argue that by indexing participants' responses into categories after the interviews have taken place (and without the interviewee's confirmation) the researchers introduced their own investigative purposes into the distribution of the data, thereby affecting its reliability. The following quote highlights the difficult nature of the seemingly straightforward task of indexing participants' answers into one of three discrete classifications:

‘..... I don’t think she should push him. She should let him maybe go into the group and sit and see how people speak and what they do at the session. He could just sit at the back or whatever and watch and see what they say and then he can make his mind up about whether he feels comfortable with what they are saying..... She should offer other options such as letting him sit in without saying anything. He could sit in the same room to see exactly what’s happening, what is being said and that way he might start thinking that maybe it’s not as bad as he thought and he maybe could do it.’

Whilst this participant is clear in her view that the therapist is not adopting the most effective strategy, can her answer be interpreted as saying that the therapist is ‘wrong’? If not, is it more accurate to describe her answer as ‘failing to specify’ when, in fact, the meaning of her response is far from ambiguous? Such dilemmas illustrate the potential threat to validity when qualitative data is indexed into discrete and mutually opposing categories and where the researcher is unable to clarify their interpretations with the participant.

### **The ‘problem’ of plausibility in developmental vignettes**

Plausibility is a crucial factor in constructing vignettes. Scenarios that are viewed by participants as highly plausible are more likely to produce rich data on how actors interpret lived-experiences than those which invite astonishment, incredulity or disbelief. As such, the more plausible the protagonist’s situation is in a vignette, the greater the likelihood of interviewees being able to put themselves in the character’s place (and thus engage in acts of Thou orientation). Whilst this is the case, the issue of plausibility affects more than the potential for interviewees to engage in specific

acts of orientation. As Hughes, (1998) argues, implausible developments in a scenario can produce negative reactions from participants, producing feelings of confusion; distress; embarrassment; anger or disinterest. Here, we explore why a perceived lack of plausibility can produce such reactions from interviewees and whether these are, in fact, detrimental to the research.

As a starting point, we need to return our attention to the nature of the interaction between the researcher and participant in the vignette interview; or, in Schutz's lexicon, the We-relationship. When participants are asked to complete a vignette exercise, an implicit aspect of the We-relationship that exists between interviewer and interviewee is that the participant adopts the role either of the 'expert' or 'well-informed citizen' (Schutz, 1964). Integral to this act is the taken for granted assumption that the interviewee possesses some degree of expertise in relation to the events which the scenario depicts. As such, if the development of the vignette – (usually) pre-determined by the researcher – contradicts the interviewee's account of what would (or could) feasibly happen then the vignette represents an implicit challenge to the interviewee's position. In this context, it could be argued that the anger, confusion or embarrassment participants may experience results from the vignette bringing the interviewee's expertise into question. For example, consider the following service user's response when the first development in the Davie scenario contradicted his account. This interviewee predicted that, upon deciding that he needed help, Davie's first port of call would be a specialist drug crisis centre. However, when informed that Davie decides to visit his GP the participant appeared to feel the urge to account for his deviation:

‘..... I didn’t think about GPs because my mother’s a GP so I kinda saw the GP help that way directly or indirectly through my mother. I guess I can see why other people would choose to think about GPs.’

In his study of the investigative practices of medics at the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Centre Garfinkel, (1967) argued that when ‘members’ reach an explanation of a situation (and from that make their decisions as to how best to act) those explanations are always available to revision, especially in the light of negative consequences. As we have argued, one negative consequence of giving a response which deviates from how the vignette unfolds is that the interviewee’s expertise can be called into question, thus damaging the ‘face-work’ (Goffman, 1969) in which they are engaged. Furthermore, given the embarrassment of losing face it is logical to assume that such experiences can be retained within the interviewee’s stock of knowledge and subsequently brought to bear on future exposures to the scenario. Indeed, this is precisely what appeared to occur when the interviewee quoted immediately above was re-interviewed.

**‘What do you think he would do at that stage?’**

Um...um...I think I remember from the last time, [inaudible] GP was the most popular answer wasn’t it?

**You’ve got a good memory.**

Personally I would still find out what drug services were available wherever I was and go and see them. The things like the crisis centre or stuff like that, something like that probably, drug worker or things like that.’

The potential for interviewees to adapt their answers in order to make them consonant with the unfolding vignette is, potentially, one of the biggest drawbacks to using developmental vignettes in longitudinal studies. However, modifying one's answers in order to align them with the vignette's development was not the only response interviewees took when confronted with events which they felt to be out of the ordinary. Some participants were resolute in their interpretations, preferring instead to challenge the plausibility of the scenario rather than their own position. In stage four of the Davie vignette, for example, participants were confronted with the situation that as a result of Davie 'topping-up' (that is, using illicit drugs on top of his prescribed methadone) clinic staff decided to reduce his daily prescription. However, it emerged during the research that prescribing protocols in such situations were not fixed, and that in some instances users could have their prescriptions increased rather than decreased, as the following quote from one practitioner illustrates:

‘..... In my experience the response wouldn't necessarily be to reduce the script if a client was...intoxicated ..... you can see why some clinicians might come to that conclusion and you know in some ways it is a perfectly safe response... but there are other possible responses.’

In this context, some service users were struck by this stage of the vignette's apparent lack of plausibility, as it clashed with that which they 'knew to be true' (Garfinkel, 1967).

‘In fact...I don't know how old this is right...

**Um...nineteen...oh sorry yeah...**



The scenario, when was it written?

**About a year ago.**

Really? Because you see for like the past couple of years, well in [City X] anyway, you go to a methadone clinic right and you are using on top of your script, they put your script up they don't reduce it. To me that doesn't make sense either right. Do you know what I mean? But yeah they go like that, "you're using on top of it? Well, we'll give you more"....'

Others service users however, viewed the reduction — or even cessation — of Davie's script as a plausible contingency.

‘.....now some people would just stop his scripts totally. So he wants to be pleased really that they are reducing it and not kicking him off his script’

How then, do researchers tackle the problem of plausibility in vignette design and respond to situations where the interviewee feels the events being depicted are out of the ordinary? One possible solution would be that through extensive piloting, adaptation and re-piloting researchers seek to devise scenarios which are perceived as highly plausible by any-and-all participants who may be exposed to them. Aside from the practical difficulties and laborious nature of this strategy, it must be borne in mind that — as the above quotes illustrate — individuals' experiences are inherently unique and diverse phenomena. As such, devising a vignette where all developments are viewed (by all participants) as highly plausible is an extremely unlikely contingency. If, however, we reject the premise that eradicating implausibility in all circumstances is possible we can begin to explore how such encounters can be

managed, and even beneficial to the research.

Following Garfinkel, the fact that developments in a vignette may challenge participants' assumed knowledge is not, in itself, a methodological drawback. As we have illustrated, it can lead to fundamental differences in participants' expectations, lived experiences and 'artful practices' (Garfinkel, 1967) being brought to the surface. Problems occur however, when participants react negatively to their statements and assumptions being contradicted. As such, the aim of the researcher should not be the eradication of implausibility but to ensure that interviewees are adequately prepared for it. In other words, rather than attempting to eliminate all possibility of participants coming to view aspects of the vignette as 'unrealistic' researchers need to prepare the ground so that interviewees are aware at the outset that their predictions may differ from how the scenario unfolds AND understand that highlighting these differences is a desired aspect of the research. In this context, deviation should not represent a loss of face either to the interviewee for giving a 'wrong' answer or the researcher for creating a 'bad' vignette.

### **Interactive developmental vignettes (IDVs): Advantages, limitations and areas of further research**

In this, the final section of the paper, we seek to highlight how making developmental scenarios interactive can address some of the challenges of vignette-based interviewing (which we have identified above) as well as highlighting areas in need of further research and debate. In doing so, this discussion will draw on the Jack and Jenny vignettes referred to previously (see Jenkins, 2006a for a fuller discussion of the Jack and Jenny scenarios). In contrast to the Davie vignette, the Jack and Jenny

stories were made interactive by constructing a series of scenarios on Microsoft PowerPoint slides then hyper-linking potential courses of action on those slides to other slides relevant to those actions. In this way, it was possible for participants to influence how the scenario would unfold, as they would only see the slides that were relevant to the courses of action they selected. Furthermore, as routes through the scenario were not fixed it was possible to chart participants' courses of action and then compare them with those of other interviewees.

**[Figure 2: Creating The Jack and Jenny Interactive Developmental Vignettes]**

As Jenkins (2006b) argued, constructing interactive developmental vignettes (IDVs) provided a number of practical benefits for the research. For example, as we have argued, vignettes have particular value in exploring the situated nature of behaviour. In this context, factors such as 'identity' and 'orientation' to the social world are not to be conceptualised as abstract entities but instead as phenomena that are generated and re-generated through social action. Unlike fixed vignettes, IDVs which enable interviewees to select courses of action for protagonists to follow, allow participants to generate the character's orientation to the social world, based on the actions they have selected. The following quote from a mother querying her construction of Jack and whether he will engage in a dangerous skateboarding game illustrates this process at work:

‘Really what I’m doing to Jack is .... I’m making him out a naughty little boy (laughs). And I dunno if I should be doing that. I reckon he’s gonna join in. He will join in because he’s at the car park now and he’s doing wrong

anyway, by just being there' (From Jenkins, 2006b: 8).

In the above example the decision as to whether or not Jack would engage in the game is based, in part, on the orientation to risk which the mother has created for him; one which is consistent with the ideal personality type: 'naughty little boy'. Thus, through the Jack IDV it was possible to record in real time the interviewee in the process of building the personality type of the protagonist through selected courses of actions and vice-versa. This lends support to Atkinson and Coffey's arguments that interviews and interview data should be conceived as pieces of social action in their own right as opposed to recollections of previous conduct. However, this process raises challenges as well as advantages. For example, being able to 'influence the behaviour of the observed' (Schutz, 1967: 174) is not a characteristic which Schutz associates with Thou-orientation. This raises the question: what particular act of orientation is the interviewee embarking upon when constructing the protagonist's personality type? Furthermore, how will the interviewee's motivational relevances impact upon the options they select? Might, for example, participants be tempted to select a more morally righteous as opposed to plausible course of action for their protagonist; by selecting actions which they *wish* they had themselves taken in relevant past situations?

Shifting our attention to the problem of plausibility, IDVs can significantly reduce the potential for participants to view the character's course of action as implausible (as they themselves would have selected it) provided, of course, the researcher is able to anticipate interviewees' likely responses when designing the vignette. In other words, if the scenario adapts in order to incorporate the interviewee's response one could

argue that it is difficult for interviewees to ever give a ‘wrong’ answer. This is not, however, to say that participants will not find any aspect of an IDV scenario unrealistic. For example, an interviewee may feel that the reaction of others in the vignette – companions for example – are out of the ordinary and therefore different to the anticipated response to the protagonist’s actions. As we have already argued this is not necessarily detrimental to the research process as valuable insights into how participants react to their taken-for-granted assumptions being challenged can be obtained. That said, a key challenge when providing interviewees with a discrete number of options is ensuring that the option the interviewee wishes to choose is, in fact, available for them to do so. In reality, the researcher is unlikely to predict all possible interviewee responses, as one rarely studies anything that is already well known and understood. If prediction fails and the interviewee must choose from a discrete number of unlikely actions, then the plausibility of protagonist’s subsequent behaviour is brought into question.

Finally, IDVs can be used as an effective tool for comparative or longitudinal research. We have discussed how data from the Davie vignette was subjected to comparative analysis. Whilst this process was illuminating, the researchers were only able to compare responses from a single section of the vignette as opposed to the scenario as a whole, which poses limitations on two distinct yet interconnected fronts: First, despite providing interviewees with a choice of two binary opposites (‘right’ and ‘wrong’) many did not reach a final position; making both interpretation and comparison problematic. In this context, IDVs which require interviewees to select an option before the scenario unfolds (as was the case with the Jack and Jenny vignettes) do not suffer from this issue, although by the same token they may require

an interviewee to choose between the lesser of two or more unlikely courses of action or create the illusion that situations are less ambiguous and more straightforward than they actually are. Second, the under-utilisation of the developmental aspect of the scenario can lead to important research questions remaining unsatisfactorily explored. In the analysis, IDVs which require interviewees to make choices at each stage of the vignette's progression enable researchers to explore how the participants' selection of one course of action at an early stage of the scenario may influence the selection of others later on. For example, in parents' and young people's responses to the Jack vignette it was possible to explore whether, if the interviewee decides Jack will go and skate in a supermarket car park illicitly and against his parents' wishes, he would be more likely to join-in a dangerous skating game afterwards. Furthermore, if in longitudinal designs participants are presented with the same IDV on more than one occasion, researchers can chart the respective routes of interviewees, identifying at a glance any early changes to their prior selections, and the implications of such alterations on the rest of their route through the scenario.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper, we have sought to advance a theoretically informed framework for using vignettes in qualitative interviews for the purposes of exploring the socially acquired knowledge and interpretative practices of participants. The use of vignettes in this fashion obviously raises important ontological and epistemological questions and, in outlining our approach to vignette-based interviewing, we have sought to address these issues. One of the central epistemological questions raised by the use of vignettes in qualitative interviewing is how can a participant's set of responses to a hypothetical scenario be used to aid our understanding of the complex and multi-

faceted nature of social phenomena? In identifying the perceptual acts of orientation in which individuals engage in when responding to vignettes, we have sought to show that how participants' seek to make sense of vignette situations are not entirely distinct from how they may seek to make sense of everyday lived events. As such, an interviewee's response to a vignette may well carry some predictive power in respect of how they would behave if they were to be subsequently presented with a similar, 'real-life' event. However, an analysis of the Schutzian systems of relevances deployed by research participants responding to vignettes, contrasted with those deployed in the situation of action, shows that there would be marked differences in both the topical and motivational relevances, and this would be likely to lead to marked differences in interpretation – differences perhaps in both the content and extensiveness of the interpretation – between the research interview and the situation of action. Nevertheless, following the argument of Atkinson and Coffey (2002) and others on qualitative interviewing, research participants' responses to vignettes can yield data of interest in their own right (regardless of their relation to participant behaviour in the situation of action outside the interview) as participants engage with the vignettes by performing acts of both Thou-orientation and They-orientation: that is, by putting themselves in the place of the central character in the vignette, and by predicting the behaviour of others in the vignette towards the central character by reference to their ideal-typical knowledge of, for example, various different occupations in the caring professions working with drug users.

We have sought to demonstrate that Thou and They orientations generated through participants' exposure and responses to vignettes can be used to explore the unquestioned beliefs which interviewees hold regarding the reality of their life-

worlds. Just as, in Schutz's example presented above, the act of a passenger boarding a train can reveal the presence of a routinised belief that the vehicle will transport them to their desired destination, so a participant predicting how a developmental vignette will unfold can reveal taken-for-granted aspects of their ideal-typical knowledge. These taken-for-granted assumptions are the aggregated product of the participants' social experiences and are deemed - at those specific points in which such re-cognition occurs - to be of relevance to the problem at hand. Vignette responses, therefore, frequently highlight the aspects of social encounters that the participant believes to be self-evident. For example, if it is taken for granted by an interviewee that a hypothetical character will provide false urine samples to staff at a fictitious methadone clinic, it is logical for the researcher to infer that – at least for this participant – providing false samples is common practice in methadone treatment.

In attempting to bring participants' basic ontological assumptions to the surface, the plausibility of a vignette is a crucial consideration. A perceived lack of plausibility can lead to certain ontological assumptions being overtly challenged by the unfolding scenario, which in turn can produce emotional and even hostile responses from interviewees. In this respect, presenting a participant with an implausible development can be likened to the disruptive social order experiments pioneered by Garfinkel. Whilst this can be illuminating, simply asking a participant how and why an event would unfold in a certain way can be equally as illuminating, and potentially less disruptive to the research process. In short, whilst a lack of plausibility is not *ipso facto* detrimental to the research process, it must be carefully managed with regards to both the participants' emotional state and the validity of the data.



From an interpretative perspective, developmental vignettes, as pioneered by Hughes (1998), have been shown to have particular advantages as a research tool over discrete ‘snapshot’ vignettes. Our interest in this paper has been in the use of developmental vignettes to generate longitudinal qualitative data, a field in which we believe they have not been used before. The conventional developmental vignette we used (the ‘Davie’ vignette) proved useful for documenting participants’ changes in perspective over time and, in particular, we noted that participants had more defined views at follow-up, that is, following their experience of treatment, though attributing cause to these changes was fraught with difficulty. We also contrasted the effectiveness of the conventional developmental vignette (the ‘Davie’ vignette) with interactive developmental vignettes (the ‘Jack and Jenny’ vignettes). Although the Jack and Jenny vignettes were not part of a longitudinal study, we can see that in principle the IDVs are likely to have advantages both in making the scenarios more plausible for participants and in enhancing the possible points for comparative analysis between different time-points for longitudinal study.

The ‘Jack and Jenny’ vignettes were relatively straightforward constructions using hyper-linked PowerPoint slides. But of course there is the potential to create far more complex scenarios using video game technology and avatars (3-D images). A video game has already been developed for drug misuse treatment purposes to allow players to experience simulated effects of drug use on the individual, family and friends (Rapoza and Urquhart, 2003). And Collaborative Virtual Environment Technology has created avatar-populated ‘second lives’ for persons with autism to develop and practice their communication skills (see for example Cheng et al. 2005). In the research literature, Williams (2007) has discussed the creation of avatar ethnographers

for studying 'virtual' communities. However, the use of CVE technology to create more realistic scenarios will not bridge the gap between the systems of relevances/interpretative processes of CVE 'second lives' and real life and, as the scenarios take on more realistic features with more opportunities for interactive engagement, so also the complexity of the research task is increased. One might draw analogy with the impact of the development of video technology on the practice of audio-recorded interviewing: the enormous complexity of non-verbal communication (see, for example, Heath, 2006) and the associated difficulties in analysis has meant that only a minority of studies of social interaction have progressed from audio to video-recording. There is a trade-off between complexity of scenario and complexity of analysis and therefore we believe that relatively simple developmental vignettes, such as those discussed here, will continue to have value as a qualitative research technique.

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### **Appendix: The 'Davie' vignette**

Davie is 19. He started smoking hash when he was 14 and soon moved on to speed and E. When he was 17, he first tried smoking heroin. After a year he started injecting and his habit quickly grew to £80 a day. He was injecting so often that he eventually lost his job and now his girlfriend has left him. Davie thinks he is no longer in control of his drug use and decides to seek help.

**What do you think Davie will do?**

Davie goes to see a local GP and tells her that he has been injecting heroin for a year and now needs help.

**What happens when Davie tells the GP he needs help?**

The GP says she doesn't treat drug users in the practice and he'll need to go to a drug treatment clinic in town. She gives him a phone number and Davie phones and makes an appointment. He is offered an assessment the following week. The staff at the clinic are very friendly and Davie is told that he can have a daily script of 40 mls of methadone if he agrees to weekly counselling from a drug worker.

**What does Davie think about this offer?**

Davie thinks that 40mls is not enough to hold him, but decides to give it a go. Within a few weeks, he starts using heroin on top of his methadone. One day, he turns up at the clinic gouching. The staff tell him that his script is being reduced.

**How does Davie react when he is told that his script is being reduced?**

Davie decides that he isn't happy and drifts out of contact with the service. Soon, he soon starts using cocaine as well as heroin and after a few weeks he is feeling

paranoid and anxious all the time. He decides he wants a place in a rehab and re-contacts the clinic to see if they can help him.

**What do you think will happen when Davie returns to the clinic?**

The doctor at the clinic says that there is a long waiting list and that Davie might not be suitable for a rehab. Davie is annoyed at this, but agrees to try and wait. He is put back on a script of 40 mls of methadone and is told that he is more likely to get a place in the rehab if he doesn't use on top. Davie agrees to this and provides clean urine samples on a number of occasions.

**Why do you think Davie does this?**

Davie has to wait 4 months before a place becomes available at a rehab. The rehab is 50 miles from his home town but looks very nice in the brochure. A friend tells Davie that it is a very good place to get clean. Davie is given an admission date and tells his family about his plans. Before he accepts a place in the rehab, Davie is asked to sign a contract. The contract involves agreeing to a set of rules and regulations such as not having visitors, getting up by eight every morning, keeping the rehab clean and tidy, and taking part in group therapy sessions.

**How does Davie feel about signing the contract?**

Davie feels uncertain about the contract, but signs anyway. On the first day, he asks the staff whether he really has to go to the group sessions. Davie has never been comfortable talking to big groups of people and he feels quite anxious. The therapist insists that Davie knew what to expect when he signed up to come to the rehab and it really is in his best interests to join in the group activities.

**Is the therapist right or wrong to tell Davie to attend the group sessions? Do you think Davie will attend the group sessions?**

Davie attends the sessions and soon starts to enjoy them. He quickly strikes up a friendship with Alex, who is also in the rehab. Everything is going well until Alex tells Davie he has some heroin and invites him to his room for a smoke. The following day, staff call a group meeting because they have evidence that some of the house members have been using. Davie can't decide whether to come forward and own up.

**What do you think Davie will do and why?**

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**TABLE 1: Distribution of Service Users' Answers to Stage Eight of the Davie Vignette at Initial and Follow-up Interview**

| <b>Service users' answers</b> | <b>@ Initial interview</b> | <b>@ Follow-up Interview</b> | <b>TOTAL</b> |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| Right                         | 47                         | 47                           | <b>94</b>    |
| Wrong                         | 9                          | 5                            | <b>14</b>    |
| DNS                           | 22                         | 7                            | <b>29</b>    |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                  | <b>78</b>                  | <b>59</b>                    | <b>137</b>   |

\* DNS = did not specify

**FIGURE 1: A Comparison of a Service User's Response to Stage Eight of the Davie Vignette at Initial and Follow-up Interview**

**Initial Interview**

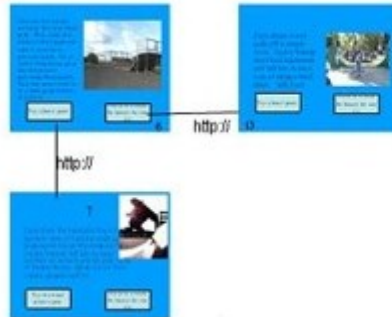
*"....she is right to tell him to go to the group session because it was explained to him beforehand ...."*

**Follow-up Interview**

*"I think she is wrong. She should'nae push him too much because he might just pull away from the rehab and no want to do it; so she should'nae push him in like that."*

**Figure 2: Creating The Jack and Jenny Interactive Developmental Vignettes**

Hyperlinking PowerPoint slides



Charting participants' answers

